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THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

THE expeditions which are generally known as the Children's Crusade made a strong impression upon the contemporaries. Comparatively few events of the thirteenth century were recounted by more chroniclers and in more various fashions. The accounts consist frequently of only a few words, such as: "Eodem anno fuit iter stultorum puerorum";¹ "Multitudo infancium ab hereticis traditur Saracenis";² or, "Eodem anno peregrinacio puerorum".³ But there are also long narratives, especially the one by Alberic⁴ in which he gives, from hearsay evidence, a story of what happened to the children across the sea. Some of the accounts are in rude verse form, such as:

Annis millenis bis centenis duodenis
Est cruce signata puerorum multa caterva;⁵

Annis millenis duodenis adde ducentos;
Tunc multi pueri sunt effecti peregrini;⁶

Anno milleno bis centeno duodeno
Cum pueris pueri currunt loca sancta tueri.⁷

Res fit mira nimis: puero ductore marinis
Sedibus innumeri conveniunt pueri.⁸

Others by their form and wording betray the fact that their material is drawn from an original in verse. These two classes of sources indicate that the children's pilgrimage had early become a theme of popular songs which were widely known. On the other hand such men as Vincent of Beauvais and Roger Bacon, writing a few decades later, felt that the expedition was of sufficient intrinsic importance to justify a mention of it in their learned works.⁹

In the thirteenth century legends soon clustered about a subject of such popular interest. Probably there was no account of the movement written by any participant. Some chroniclers had known something of the beginnings; others had seen the bands on their march; no one knew the facts for the whole movement; conse-

¹ "Ann. Ellenhardi", *MGSS.*, XVII. 101.

² "Ann. Heimburg.", *MGSS.*, XVII. 714.

³ "Cont. Claustroneoburg, tertia", *MGSS.*, IX. 634.

⁴ *MGSS.*, XXIII. 893.

⁵ "Flores Temp.", *MGSS.*, XXIV. 240.

⁶ "Chron. Elwacen.", *MGSS.*, X. 37.

⁷ "Ann. Thuring. breves", *MGSS.*, XXIV. 41.

⁸ "Ann. Zweifalt.", *MGSS.*, X. 58.

⁹ Vincent, *Bibl. Mundi*, XXX., c. 5, and *Speculum Hist.*, XXXI., c. 5; Bacon, *Opus Majus* (ed. Bridges), I. 401.

quently all felt free to follow their own fancy in explaining the points concerning which they had no knowledge. Those who were strictly contemporary or who were writing under the glamor of the enthusiasm excited by the children were inclined to ascribe the origin of the movement to divine inspiration,¹⁰ or to the message of an angel,¹¹ or to a vision.¹² Writers who had known something of the failure of the children conceived of the movement as the work of the devil;¹³ this opinion gained ground steadily and colored all the later accounts. By no one of the chroniclers, however, was it more naïvely expressed than by Thomas Fuller, who wrote, four hundred years later, in his *Holy War*: "It was done (saith my author [M. Paris]) by the instinct of the devil, who, as it were, desired a cordial of children's blood to comfort his weak stomach long cloyed with murdering of men."¹⁴

Naturally these legends and beliefs obscured the truth to some extent, both then and since. For while there is a wealth of material to be gleaned from about sixty writers of the thirteenth century, of whom at least sixteen left independent accounts worthy of credence in whole or part, modern historians have been influenced by the romantic phases of the movement and have not followed the critical methods which they employ in describing other events. Even Röhricht, who was generally so sober and matter-of-fact and in his *Geschichte des Königreichs Jerusalem* wrote such uninspiring, although extremely useful, chronological summaries of events, when he tells of the Children's Crusade¹⁵ accepts uncritically legendary statements of Alberic in order to piece out his tale. Janssens, whose account¹⁶ is on the whole the best, did not know all the sources and used his material equally uncritically, apparently seeking the picturesque and striking. The same characteristics mark Gray's *Children's Crusade*,¹⁷ and, to some extent, Molinier's article in *La*

¹⁰ "Chron. regia Colon.", *MGSS.*, XVII. 826; "Chron. Anon. Laud.", Bouquet, XVIII. 715.

¹¹ "Ann. Placent. Guelfi", *MGSS.*, XVIII. 426.

¹² "Sicardus", Muratori, VII. 624.

¹³ "Ex deceptione maligni hostis", "Chron. Ebersheim.", *MGSS.*, XXIII. 450; "instinctu diabolico", "Ann. Admunt. cont.", *MGSS.*, IX. 592.

¹⁴ Pickering edition (London, 1840), p. 160.

¹⁵ *Hist. Zeitschrift*, XXXVI. 1 ff. (1876).

¹⁶ Étienne de Cloyes et les Croisades d'Enfants", *Bulletin de la Soc. Dunoise* (Chateaudun, 1891).

¹⁷ First published in 1870, and frequently reprinted since. The author of this interesting little book was not a trained historian and consequently it is not surprising to find him using good, bad, and indifferent sources with equal confidence. In his bibliography of thirty titles he cites as a contemporary a man who died before the movement began; he quotes the same account under two different names in three instances; and he has many other errors.

Grande Encyclopédie. Consequently it has seemed worth while to set forth the facts about this subject.

There were two movements in 1212, one of French, the other of German children; if they were in any way connected, as seems probable, such connection cannot be proved from the extant sources. For the French children the most trustworthy sources are the anonymous chroniclers of Laon,¹⁸ Mortemer,¹⁹ Jumièges,²⁰ and Andres.²¹ All of these writers are evidently describing the same movement but there are only a very few facts which are vouched for by more than one. From their brief accounts the following story can be gleaned.

In the month of June, 1212,²² a shepherd boy named Stephen from the village of Cloyes, near Vendôme, said that the Lord had appeared to him in the guise of a poor pilgrim, had accepted bread from him, and had given him a letter to carry to the King of France. He went to S. Denis with shepherd lads of his own age and there the Lord wrought many miracles through him, as many have testified. There were also very many other boys who were held in great reverence by the vulgar throngs in very many places, so that they also were believed to have worked miracles. A multitude of children joined them, as if they were about to go under their leadership to the holy boy Stephen whom they all recognized as their master and prince.²³ The bands, composed of boys and girls with some youths and older persons, marched in procession through the cities, castles, towns, and villages, carrying banners, candles, and crosses, and swinging censers, singing in the vernacular, "Lord God, exalt Christianity! Lord God, restore to us the true cross." They sang not only these words but many others, because there were various processions and each one made such variations as it chose.²⁴ When they were asked by their parents or others where they wished to go they replied, one and all, as if they had been moved by one spirit, "To God!"²⁵ The children could not be restrained at first; but, according to the annals of Jumièges, they were finally compelled by

¹⁸ Bouquet, XVIII. 715.

¹⁹ *MGSS.*, VI. 467.

²⁰ Generally called "Anon. cont. App. Roberti de Monte", *MGSS.*, XXVI. 510.

²¹ Bouquet, XVIII. 574. Andres is near Calais.

²² Chronicle of Laon. There is no doubt that the year was 1212. The Chronicle of Mortemer gives 1213; but the context indicates why the mistake was made.

²³ All thus far is from the Laon chronicle. The annals of Jumièges also state that the movement started from Vendôme.

²⁴ Chronicle of Mortemer. The accounts from Andres and Jumièges also mention the cities, castles, etc.

²⁵ Chronicle of Andres. Cf. the annals of Jumièges for their answer, "To God!"

hunger to return home. According to the Laon chronicle the king, at last, consulted the masters of the University of Paris concerning the matter and at his command the children returned home. The other two chroniclers say nothing about the ending. With regard to the extent of the movement, one says the children came from diverse parts of Gaul; another, that the movement extended through almost all Gaul; a third, that it was in the Kingdom of the French; the fourth, that the children came from different cities, castles, towns, and villages. It is to be noted that Jumièges and Mortemer are near Rouen, and Andres near Calais. Consequently the places to which our information extends were included roughly in the territory between Paris, Laon, Calais, and Rouen, with the possibility that the movement started from Vendôme, and that it may have extended much more widely. All the four sources indicate that the participants were many; one says an infinite multitude; the Laon chronicle gives the number with Stephen as 30,000.

It is significant that only one of these sources mentions Stephen or indicates that the movement had any unity or purpose, except going "to God". Later accounts naturally were prone to fill out the gaps. The Laon chronicle says that it seemed to many that the Lord was about to do some great and new thing through these innocents spontaneously gathered together, but it turned out very differently. The chronicle of Mortemer believed that it was a presage of future events, namely of those which happened the next year "when the Roman legate signed a multitude with the cross for a new crusade". This idea may well have been fostered by the indefinite statement of the chronicler at Andres that the children "were hastening toward the Mediterranean". But not one of these four, who are the best authorities, hints that the children were thinking of a crusade, or even a pilgrimage. Yet the movement was connected with the crusades in the minds of those who wrote a little later. The *Annals of Soissons*²⁶ state that the infants and children said they were going across the sea to seek the holy cross; and the *Chronicle of Barnwell*,²⁷ that it is reported that the children, when asked what they proposed to do, said that they were about to recover the cross of Christ. The opinion soon became general that the French children had planned a crusade. Later writers added more details. An unknown author added to the chronicle of Matthew of Paris an account of the march toward the Mediterranean. The leader rode in a chariot surrounded by armed guards and was reputed so holy that anyone counted himself fortunate who could procure a hair

²⁶ *MGSS.*, XXVI. 521.

²⁷ Written about 1227, in England.

from his head or a thread from his garments. "But all perished either on land or sea."²⁸ In the compilation which formerly passed as the work of Albericus Trium Fontium a long account is given, to which reference has already been made. "At first they came from the neighborhood of Vendôme to Paris." When they were about 30,000 in number they proceeded to Marseilles as if they were about to cross the sea against the Saracens. There two merchants, Hugo Ferreus and William Porcus, offered to carry them across the sea without charge. They filled seven great vessels with the infants; two were shipwrecked and all on board were drowned. The other five vessels went to Bugia and Alexandria and the children were sold to the Saracens. The caliph bought four hundred, all clerics, among whom there were eighty priests. This same caliph had formerly studied at Paris in the garb of a cleric. Eighteen of the children were tortured to death because they refused to renounce their Christian faith, but not one of the others became an apostate. One of the clerics escaped and reported these facts and added that eighteen years after the expedition the ruler of Alexandria still held 700, "no longer infants, but men of ripe age". It is a satisfaction to learn from this account that the two merchants were detected in other villainy and hung.²⁹ This story rests upon the evidence of the one clerk who claimed to have returned, and is full of manifest improbabilities, such as the facts that eighty of the infants were priests, and that the Moslems tortured the children to make them apostatize. Other later writers repeat some of these statements and add some accounts of miracles; but not one chronicle mentions the band of children at any place between Paris and Marseilles. And not a single chronicle written south of the Loire mentions the movement at all. It is very clear that the contemporaries were right and that the children returned home, after marching around and singing in processions for a time.

For the German children the material is more ample and their undertaking may well be called a crusade. It is true that no one of the chroniclers depicts the whole movement and that each one can be trusted only for a few facts. But several entirely independent writers give separate dates and geographical indications which dovetail neatly and enable us to follow some portions of the crusade with great accuracy; and furthermore they corroborate one another with regard to some details. The best of these accounts were written at

²⁸ M. Paris, *Chron. Maj.* (ed. Luard), II. 556; cf. preface, p. x.

²⁹ *MGSS.*, XXIII. 893.

Cologne,³⁰ Treves,³¹ Spires,³² Marbach³³ in Alsace, Ebersheim,³⁴ which is northwest from Schlettstadt, Admunt³⁵ near Salzburg, Cremona,³⁶ Piacenza,³⁷ and Genoa;³⁸ all but the two from Cremona and Genoa are anonymous; but all were either composed within a few years after 1212 or else contain statements which suggest that the account was given by an eye-witness. Neglecting, for the present, the many other less valuable accounts, the story of the expedition can be reconstructed from these nine or ten independent sources.

The leader of the German movement was a boy from Cologne named Nicholas;³⁹ where it began is uncertain, although possibly it was in or near the Rhine valley.⁴⁰ The year was 1212⁴¹ and probably the time was between Easter and Pentecost.⁴² The participants are said to have been very numerous⁴³ and to have come from a wide extent of territory.⁴⁴ There were men and women, boys and girls,⁴⁵ even babes at the breasts;⁴⁶ the majority were young and appear to have been mainly from the agricultural classes, as it is recorded that they left their ploughs, carts, or herds,⁴⁷ and hastened to join the bands which were marching through the country. Some evil men and women were attracted by the excitement or by the opportunity for plunder and vice.⁴⁸ Just when and where the various bands⁴⁹ came together and marched under the leadership of Nicholas cannot be ascertained, but there seems to have been only one company when they first entered Italy and proceeded to Genoa.

³⁰ Two separate accounts: "Cont. II.", *MGSS.*, XXIV. 17-18; "Cont. III.", *ibid.*, XVII. 826. Less trustworthy than some of the others.

³¹ *MGSS.*, XXIV. 398-399.

³² *Ibid.*, XVII. 84.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, XXIII. 450.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, IX. 592.

³⁶ By Sicardus, bishop of Cremona, who died in 1215. Muratori, VII. 624; Migne, *Patr. Lat.*, CCXIII. col. 539.

³⁷ *MGSS.*, XVIII. 426.

³⁸ By Ogerius, a contemporary. Muratori, VI. 403; *MGSS.*, XVIII. 131.

³⁹ "Puerulus Nicolaus nomine veniens a pago Coloniensi", "Chron. Ebersheim." ; cf. "Ogerius", "Ann. Plac. Guelfi", "Gesta Trev.", "Ann. Admunt."

⁴⁰ Sicardus says, "in partibus Coloniae"; but he does not mention Nicholas and may have confused the place of starting with the home of the leader.

⁴¹ All the sources mentioned above, except one; and many others.

⁴² So in "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. II.", which gives the wrong year.

⁴³ According to six of the best sources.

⁴⁴ Three of these sources speak of participants from both Germany and Gaul; one adds Burgundy. The "Gesta Trev." says from all the towns and villages of Germany.

⁴⁵ According to eight of these sources.

⁴⁶ "Ann. Plac. Guelfi".

⁴⁷ "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. III." ; cf. "Ann. Marbac."

⁴⁸ "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. III." ; cf. "Ann. Admunt."

⁴⁹ "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. II." ; "Gesta Trev."

All but two of the best sources speak of this movement as a crusade or pilgrimage and the children are described as carrying crosses, staves, and scripts.⁵⁰ Nicholas himself bore a cross in the shape of a Greek Tau but the chronicler at Treves says it was not easy to tell what it was made of. The pilgrimage was looked upon with favor by the people, except possibly the parents and friends,⁵¹ and food was gladly given to the children. Opposition on the part of some of the clergy was attributed to their jealousy.⁵²

Their general route was up the Rhine valley, over the Alps, and down into Italy:⁵³ their presence is mentioned at Spire, through which some of them probably passed on July 25,⁵⁴ and at Piacenza, which Nicholas reached on August 20 or 21.⁵⁵ On Saturday, August 25, they arrived at Genoa where, "in the opinion of good men, the pilgrims numbered more than seven thousand men, women, boys, and girls".⁵⁶ "On the following Sunday they left the city; but many men, women, boys, and girls of their number remained at Genoa."⁵⁷ Some are said to have gone to Marseilles,⁵⁸ others to "*Vieneiam*, which is a city near the sea, and there some were taken on board vessels and carried off by pirates to be sold to the Saracens";⁵⁹ still others went to Brindisi where "the bishop detecting the plot did not permit them to embark; for they had been sold to the heathen by the father of Nicholas".⁶⁰ Evidently, from these accounts, the band was breaking up and seeking at various ports to cross over to the Holy Land.⁶¹ When they first entered Italy they had all declared "with one heart and one voice that they would pass through the seas on dry land and would recover the Holy Land and Jerusalem".⁶² Finally all seem to have become discouraged; many perished of hardships, hunger, and thirst, in the forests

⁵⁰ "Ogerius".

⁵¹ "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. II."

⁵² "Ann. Marbac."

⁵³ Cf. "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. II." It is possible that there were various bands which followed different routes. Some of the statements in the chronicles written in parts of Germany remote from the Rhine valley can be understood more easily by this hypothesis; but the indications are too scanty to justify its assertion.

⁵⁴ "Ann. Spir.", *MGSS.*, XVII. 84.

⁵⁵ "Ann. Plac. Guelfi"; cf. "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. II."

⁵⁶ "Ogerius".

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. II." This probably gave rise to the story about the French children.

⁵⁹ "Chron. Ebersheim." Again, cf. the story of the French children.

⁶⁰ "Gesta Trev."

⁶¹ The children are said to have gone to Treviso, *MGSS.*, IX. 780, and probably to Monza, "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. II."; but this may have been Mainz.

⁶² "Sicardus", Muratori, VII. 624.

and waste places; many were despoiled by the Lombards;⁶³ many were sold into slavery in divers places.⁶⁴ Some at length, when they realized the folly of their undertaking, went to Rome,⁶⁵ and the young children and old people were released from their vow to go on a crusade; the others were not freed, but were allowed to postpone the fulfillment of their vow.

The few who returned home, went back ignominiously, singly or in little groups, silently and sadly. The people who had so generously supplied their wants on their triumphant progress now turned a deaf ear to their entreaties and pointed in derision at the maidens who had gone forth as virgins and now returned in shame.⁶⁶ It is recorded that Nicholas afterwards fought bravely at Acre and in the siege of Damietta and returned unharmed.⁶⁷

Naturally the imagination of the contemporaries seized upon the obscurity attending the end of the movement and fanciful accounts and explanations were soon believed. The most interesting of the tales invented to account for the origin of the crusade ascribed it to the desire of the Old Man of the Mountains to obtain a choice band of young warriors.⁶⁸ Röhrich, in the account already mentioned, connects the tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin with the Children's Crusade. He states that the original of the tale is dated in 1284 and that it records that the rat-catcher by magic attracted hundreds of children to follow him. He thinks that it is significant that the legend, after relating the disappearance of the children in the mountain, makes them reappear on the Road of Charles the Great, the traditional route of crusaders on their way to the Holy Land.⁶⁹

While this crusading movement is of comparatively little importance it is of great interest for the light which it throws upon the mental attitude of the contemporaries. Many of the statements which have been quoted from the chronicles illustrate this. It must also be remembered that somewhat similar undertakings by children are recorded in 1237 and in 1458.⁷⁰ It is easy to understand why the

⁶³ "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. III."

⁶⁴ "Ann. Admunt."

⁶⁵ "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. II." ; "Ann. Marbac."

⁶⁶ "Chron. Ebersheim." ; "Ann. Marbac." ; "Gesta Trev." ; "Chron. reg. Colon. Cont. III."

⁶⁷ "Ann. Admunt." says (1217), "Post non multum temporis in peregrinatione sancte crucis prefatus dux transfretavit, et apud Akirs et in obsidione Damiate, ad duos fere annos [1219] strennue militavit; et tandem incolomis remeavit: et hoc totum infra spacium tam presentis anni quam etiam duorum precedentium annorum", which indicates that it was strictly contemporary.

⁶⁸ Vincent of Beauvais; cf. Chronicle of Lanercost. The Old Man of the Mountains was the head of the sect of Assassins.

⁶⁹ *Hist. Zeitschrift*, XXXVI. 8 (1876).

⁷⁰ Röhrich, *Hist. Zeitschrift*, XXXVI. 2 (1876); cf. Annals of Waverley,

children might desire in their enthusiasm to join the triumphantly advancing bands, but it is difficult to explain the acquiescence of their parents and the favorable opinion of the crusade apparently held by learned clerics. One writer puts into the mouth of the great Innocent III. the exclamation, "These children put us to shame, because while we sleep they rush to recover the Holy Land."⁷¹ In spite of Innocent's zeal for the cause of the crusades, we can scarcely believe that he could have viewed such an undertaking with approval; but even Luchaire's profound study of this pope has not revealed all the phases of his many-sided character.

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⁷¹ *MGSS.*, XVI. 355.